

Listing of Claims:

Claims 1-19 (Cancelled).

20. (Currently amended) A reagent for staining bacteria comprising:

(a) a staining solution containing a polymethine dye; and

(b) a diluent containing a buffer for maintaining an acidic pH and an effective amount of a substance capable of reducing nitrite ions:

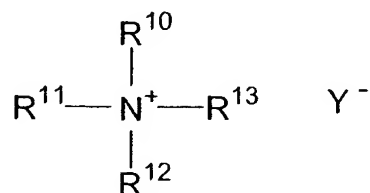
wherein the substance capable of reducing nitrite ions is selected from the group consisting of:

isoascorbic acid, aminomethanesulfonic acid, aminoethanesulfonic acid, glutamic acid, aspartic acid, mercaptoacetic acid, 3-mercaptopropionic acid, sulfamic acid, sulfanilic acid, sulfurous acid, pyrosulfurous acid, phosphinic acid, glycine, glutamine, asparagines, methionine, glutathione, cysteine, hydroxylamine and salts thereof; sulfanilamide; aminomethane; mercaptoethanol; thiophenol; and urea.

21. (Cancelled)

22. (Previously presented) The reagent for staining bacteria according to claim 20 further comprising a cationic surfactant.

23. (Previously presented) The reagent for staining bacteria according to claim 22, wherein the cationic surfactant is a quaternary ammonium salt represented by the following formula:



wherein R^{10} is a C_{6-18} alkyl group or $(C_6H_5)-CH_2-$; R^{11} , R^{12} and R^{13} , the same or different, are a C_{1-3} alkyl group or a benzyl group; Y^- is a halogen ion.

24. (Previously presented) The reagent for staining bacteria according to claim 20, wherein the buffer has a pKa of 1 to 5.5.

25. (Previously presented) The reagent for staining bacteria according to claim 20, wherein the buffer is used to maintain a pH of 2.0-3.0.

26. (Previously presented) The reagent for staining bacteria according to claim 23, wherein the cationic surfactant is at least one selected from the group consisting of decyl trimethyl ammonium salt, dodecyl trimethyl ammonium salt, tetradecyl trimethyl ammonium salt, hexadecyl trimethyl ammonium salt and octadecyl trimethyl ammonium salt.

27. (Previously presented) The reagent for staining bacteria of claim 20 wherein the dye is a fluorescent dye.

28. (Canceled).

29. (Canceled).

30. (Previously Presented) A reagent for staining bacteria comprising:

(a) a staining solution containing a polymethine dye;

(b) a diluent containing a buffer for maintaining a pH of 2.0-3.0 and an effective amount of a substance capable of reducing nitrite ions.

31. (Previously Presented) A reagent for staining bacteria comprising a polymethine dye, a sulfamic acid and a buffer at an acidic pH.